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AUTHOR Pollak, Susan
INSTITUTION Harvard Univ., Cambridge, Mass. Graduate School of Education.
SPONS AGENCY Bernard Van Leer Foundation, The Hague (Netherlands).
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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the history, educational philosophy and teaching methods of Quranic schools is divided into two sections. The first section discusses the historical development of such schools beginning in 650 A.D. with their strong emphasis on verbatim mastery of text, self-paced learning, and literacy skills. The second section provides a case study of one student's recollections of initiation into schooling, the teacher-student relationship, and teaching methods. The document concludes with a list of additional papers prepared for the Project on Human Potential. A seven-page list of project research papers concludes the document. (IS)

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Quranic Schooling: Setting, Context and Process

Susan Pollak

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Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

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The Quranic school has changed remarkably little over the centuries, and in places as diverse as Casablanca and Djakarta, one can still hear the early morning sounds of the chanting of the Koran. Mchammed attached considerable importance to the acquisition of knowledge, and literacy was so highly esteemed that those who could read and write were given the title Kamil, or perfect.

The first elementary school, called a kuttab or writing (in teacher's house) school, dated back to 650 A.D. The setting for education beyond the elementary level was the mosque itself. These schools were called madrasa or "place for giving lesson."

It is said that the curriculum began when the child first learned to speak. At this point, he was taught the Islamic article of faith, La ilaha'ill Allah, "There is no God but Allah." After this the child learned a verse from the Koran, "Exalted is Allah, the king in truth, there is no God but him, the Lord of the stately throne of Heaven." (verse xxiii, 117b) The child was then taught the "throne verse" (ii, 256) and the last verses of Sura lix, "He is Allah, there is no deity but Him, the Holy King, etc." It was thought that parents who taught their children in this way would not be brought to judgement by God.

Formal education usually began at the age of seven, with systematic instruction in the Koran. This also included instruction in the call to prayer, (adhan) and the different types of ablutions. The school day was marked by the cleansing of the reading and

writing tablets. For example, the cleansing of the tablets indicated the closing of the morning period. There were various rituals which accompanied this act, as well as magical powers which were ascribed to the water used for the cleansing.

The literature on Quranic education discusses in great detail the proper demeanour of the teacher toward his students, as well as the proper way to conduct the school. It is believed that on the Day of Judgment, God will subject the teacher to an interrogation as to whether or not he maintained strict impartiality between students. Punishment was also considered to be a necessity. There is one story that relates a beating so severe that the student's arm was black and blue. The student, a young prince, complained to his father, and showed him the injured arm. The father, who was pleased, invited the teacher for a banquet dinner, commenting: "You are at liberty even to kill him: it were better that he die than remain a fool."

While teaching was strict, students were given a holiday when they mastered a section of the Koran. This day was even celebrated with a special feast, called an iqlaba.

The Quranic school was instituted to maintain and propagate Islam. On this level, it has a lot in common with other religious schools, such as the heder and monastic Christian schools. The main similarities are the following: 1. An emphasis on verbatim oral mastery of a body of teachings and ritual, 2. A system of self paced learning with no fixed grades or ages, and individualized instruction in a master-apprentice relationship after the elementary level, 3. The learning of literacy skills

to supplement oral mastery.

The word Quran means "recitation"; this was, and still is, the main goal of Quranic education. In order to recite properly, students are taught to memorize as much of the Koran as possible. This is a challenge of considerable magnitude, and the average student spends 6-8 years of full-time study on this goal. There are basically four steps in the process. In the elementary school, the kuttab, the student learns the alphabet by chanting the letters. The second step is writing the letters. This is usually accompanied by the memorization of a few short suras or chapters of the Quran. At this level, students can memorize what is written, but cannot read for comprehension. The third stage, the intermediate level, involves writing and reciting, and mastery of one section after another of the Quran. The last stage is when the student is able to write from dictation. Most students, however, do not go beyond the first two stages.

Case Study

As descriptions of traditional Quranic schools vary little across time and countries, the following account from Lamin Sanneh will be seen as paradigmatic.

When the child is admitted to the Quranic school, his head is shaved to indicate his initiated status, and the Basmala (which begins the Koran) is written on his palms. He is then told to lick his hands, and a ball of grain is placed in each

palm.

A key item in the Koranic schools was the wooden slate on which the verses of the Koran were inscribed and learned by heart. This slate was said to prefigure the perfect heavenly masterpiece.

As mentioned above, many students leave the school after the second stage of mastery has been reached. If this happens, a "passing out" ceremony is organized, and the parents are expected to give a monetary payment to redeem their children. In traditional times, the parents gave the teacher a slave, or the price of one, to get their sons back. If the parents had no money, the student remained the property of the teacher until he could work hard enough to earn his way to freedom.

The teacher of the Quran was usually an imposing figure, who was believed to have many secrets at his command. Some parents believed that his glance had the power to mend the ways of wayward children. His authority was never questioned or doubted. The teacher was thought to be an embodiment of divine knowledge: "The teacher's acceptance is the nearest thing to divine acceptance, and represents it as far as it can... the disciple must honour the shaykh deeply . Therein lies his hope." The sheikh's role in the process of education, at least from the Sufi perspective, is to lead the disciple to eternal salvation. At the initiation ceremony the student states:

> I submit my body and soul to you. Whatever you command I shall do, and whatever you forbid me I shall refrain from.

Some Quranic schools functioned as retreats for strangers, as well as hospices for travellers. One report noted that the schools presented an example of order and attention "not to be excelled." Yet as Sanneh notes, this form of education had virtues as well as drawbacks:

> ... (We) never questioned openly some of the fundamental principles on which it (the school) was based. Teacher... made that kind of opposition impossible... But the Koranic school was also attractive for other reasons. Pious men, visiting religious notables and the important community dignitaries came there on visits. We had the benefit of seeing some of these men at close quarters and learning about many other places in the Islamic world.

Sannah recounts that during his childhood, when he asked his father questions about the nature of God, he quickly learned that this sort of questioning was not encouraged. His father fixed "his cold and deliberate eyes on me, " and said, "God is not a subject for idle speculation."

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